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ABSTRACT

This Digest identifies and describes ways that clients' resistance may be exhibited during career counseling. It states that whenever clients are involved in change, client resistance should be expected. Some examples of types of resistance that may be exhibited include fear of counseling, fear of taking responsibility, making excuses, and overt physical behavior. It suggests several counseling strategies that may be helpful with these encounters including working alliances, joining, metaphors, and labeling and reframing. The paper states that these examples point out the significance of the active role counselors need to take in dealing directly with client resistance since, no matter the cause, client resistance impedes progress. (Contains six references.) (JDM)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services

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By

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ERIC DIGEST

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Working with Resistant Clients in Career Counseling

Norman C. Gysbers

Little has been written about client resistance in career counseling. Much more has been written about client resistance in counseling and psychotherapy literature (Walborn, 1996). Why is this so? One reason may be that some counselors have conceptualized and practiced career counseling as being devoid of process and relationship; career counseling for them focuses mainly on outcomes and methods within a relatively short period of time from one to three sessions. The conceptualizations they use to guide their work in career counseling do not provide for the concept of client resistance.

Blustein and Spengler (1995) point out that client resistance, seen or unseen, can occur whenever counseling takes place, however, the counseling is labeled. It doesn't matter whether counseling is labeled psychotherapy or career counseling. Why do clients resist? In helping individuals make changes in their lives through counseling, whether we label it career counseling or personal counseling, we will evoke resistance in clients.[1]

Recognizing Resistance

It is important to remember that for some clients, career counseling is straight forward. Client change is minimal so little or no client resistance is present. But for many clients, whether by conscious choice or unconscious action, resistance in some form at some level is part of career counseling because change is involved.

In working with clients who may be resistant, it is important to acknowledge that resistance can and does occur in career counseling. If you do not acknowledge this, then you will not look for resistance in your work with clients. And, if you do not look for resistance, you will not see it. As a result you may misread and misunderstand some client behavior as career counseling unfolds.

What does client resistance look like? For the purpose of this digest I have selected examples of different types of resistance that may be exhibited by clients in career counseling. These examples include fear of counseling, fear of taking responsibility, making excuses, and overt physical behavior.

Fear of Counseling

Client resistance due to fear of counseling is a type of resistance described by Meara and Patton (1994). It can take three forms. One form is fear of the counselor. A second form is fear of the counseling process, while a third form is fear of discovery.

Fear of Taking Responsibility

Another type of client resistance can be labeled the fear of taking responsibility. Acceptance of responsibility for decisions is one of the most difficult things clients face in their lives. Counselors' awareness and appreciation of the potential burden and threat that taking responsibility represents to clients are prerequisite to dealing with resistance in a positive manner.

Making Excuses

Another way of understanding, interpreting, and working with resistance is to consider the concept of excuses. Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky (1983) defined excuses as "explanations or actions that lessen the negative implications of an actor's [client's] performance, thereby maintaining a positive image for oneself and others " (p. 4). Making excuses for their actions or inactions may be a way for clients to resist taking responsibility for their behavior, for not responding to the demands of the career counseling process and the tasks which may be involved.

Overt Physical Behavior

Client resistance can be manifested not only in what clients say during career counseling but also in their overt physical behavior as career counseling unfolds (Meara & Patton, 1994). Some clients are silent and passive. Some clients show up late for career counseling sessions. Some clients do not show up at all for career counseling. Other clients terminate career counseling prematurely because they can't (won't) deal with important issues, with change.

Dealing With Resistance

Resistive clients have their own unique, idiosyncratic patterns for survival. Understanding that resistance can and does take place in career counseling, recognizing the patterns resistive clients use, and knowing how to work

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with resistance, if present, within the career counseling process are crucial. Although there are no strategies that are guaranteed to completely clear away resistance, the following examples of counseling strategies have been found to be helpful.

Working Alliance

However you come to understand and work with client resistance in career counseling, it is important to remember that a strong client-counselor working alliance is the foundation. As Walborn (1996) suggested, "Resistance melts with time and understanding, as the therapeutic relationship matures" (p. 244). A strong client-counselor working alliance may also open the door to provide new insights about ways to interpret client behavior.

Joining

Joining is more than empathy, the reflection of feeling, or other relationship concepts associated with client-centered counseling. To join with clients requires that you appreciate their life struggles, not just the feelings of the moment. When you join with clients, you let them know that you are aware of their life struggles and that you are willing to work with them.

Metaphors

Metaphors are ways of talking about experiences. They provide clients with a story to which they can relate their experiences. Use stories that stimulate reframing, as communication devices to overcome client resistance.

Labeling and Reframing

Labeling and reframing clients' expressions provide a way to help them see themselves and their world differently (Bandler & Grinder, 1979). By providing new words and ways of organizing those words, you help your clients by providing them with new patterns for organizing and viewing their worlds. Motivation and attitudinal changes often are associated with the labeling and reframing processes.

Some Closing Thoughts

This paper has identified and described example ways clients' resistance may be exhibited during career counseling. The purpose was to highlight the point that whenever clients are involved in change, client resistance is probably not far behind. In fact, client resistance is to be expected. The topic of change does not actually have to be discussed. Just the thought of possible change stimulated by the presence of a counselor may initiate client resistance. Another purpose was to provide you with a language system to identify and describe client resistance so that when it is being exhibited you will recognize it.

But, being able to only recognize client resistance is not enough, so in this paper sample counseling techniques were presented that can be used to respond to client resistance. The purpose in doing so was to underscore the active role you need to take in dealing directly with client resistance. If you know what the behavior (client resistance) is and you have hypotheses about why it is being exhibited at a particular time, then you can respond to it directly and naturally within the context of the working alliance. Remember, "Whatever the cause, client resistance impedes progress and cannot be ignored" (Yost & Corbishley, 1987, p. 53).

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[1]Adapted from Gysbers, N.C., Heppner, M.M., & Johnston, J.A. (1998). *Career counseling: Process, issues, and techniques.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Used with permission.

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